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THE LAW OF THE HENDECASYLLABLE

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Lex haec carminibus data est iocosis,

Ne possint, nisi pruriant, iuvare.

Martial 1, 36, 10, 11.

“THIS is the law of gay poetry, that it is nothing worth, unless it be indecent.” These two lines, written by Martial to an otherwise unknown friend Cornelius who had complained that his verses were *parum severi* and not adapted for reading aloud in school, have been erected into an *ex post facto* law, supposed by at least one reputable critic, Georges Lafaye, to have exerted its malign influence over various kinds of light poetry, and in particular the hendecasyllable, throughout their career from the time of their earliest appearance in Greek literature.

It is extremely difficult to disentangle a poet from his work, it is even more difficult to disentangle his work, his poems, from the mass of contributory causes which have helped to shape it, to give the form and content of the written product to the more or less nebular nucleus of the poet's original idea or emotion. Obviously the critic's task will be lightened in exact proportion to the number of so-called laws or general principles he can discover. If we know that lyric poets since the days of Archilochus had a habit of leaving their shields on the field of battle, we can confidently affirm both the irony and the bravery of Horace when we read the lines (*Od.* 2, 7, 9, 10): —

Tecum Philippos et celerem fugam

sensi relictæ non bene parmula

“We were together when I felt the shock of Philippi and the headlong rout, my poor shield ingloriously left behind me.” But such clear cases are rare; one must be very sure that the general principle is really general, and that it applies to the particular kind of poems with which we are dealing. It is because M. Lafaye's law of the hendecasyllable would if correct be so important for the history of the

metre that it seems worth while to review his argument (*Catulle et ses modèles*, pp. 95-137).

M. Lafaye begins by making a distinction between true lyric and light poetry, *poésie légère*, which must be content with a form less ample and rich than that of true lyric and must renounce complicated metres. The Romans employed for this genre a special metre, the hendecasyllabic. Before the Romans, little is known of the history of the hendecasyllable. We are certain that Sappho and Anacreon used it, but none can say whether or not it was already the sign, the distinctive index of a genre. M. Lafaye argues that the Alexandrian epoch was very fertile in hendecasyllables; "if they have not survived and if Latin writers do not even quote them, it is precisely because the production was so voluminous" — an argument which seems a precarious foundation for his assertion that the Roman use of the metre was very similar to that of the Alexandrians. Coming down to Roman times, he makes the following estimate of the character of the genre. "No kind of verse except comic trimeter was more like prose. It lacked dignity, and so was foreign to the Roman genius. It was well adapted to the liveliness and wit of Greek conversation, but this very quality was a defect in the eyes of the Romans. For the Roman people in their conduct of life assigned a definite share to indecency; they set limits to it, within which it might freely display itself; they forbade it to go beyond these limits and were strong enough to keep it confined within them. Among the Greeks, on the contrary, this indecency showed itself everywhere with the fine unconscious naïveté which distinguishes it in the comedies of Aristophanes; their conversation reflected this peculiar trait of their manners, and they themselves liked to discover it in their familiar poetry; licentious language was not merely tolerated in the hendecasyllable, but demanded as an indispensable spice; it was one of the laws of the genre." This is Lafaye's central position, to the support of which he brings various passages from Pliny the Younger, Martial, and Catullus himself.

The Romans did not understand how a respectable man could publish verses in which things were called by their names.¹ Pliny hopes his friends will be indulgent; admits he is not as brave as his

¹ Plin. *Ep.* 4, 14, ne verbis quidem nudis abstinuisse.

predecessors; he has avoided *verba nuda*. This is a great reform and he hopes to disarm critics. But in vain, for Aristo¹ tells him he is being discussed in the salons. Pontius, another friend, attacks him frankly.² Pliny defends himself by recalling Cicero's verses on Tiro, about the indecency of which there is no doubt; and finally invokes the success his hendecasyllables have had; "even the Greeks have begun to sing them." But really all his argument hangs on the lines of Catullus: —

Nam castum esse decet pium poetam
ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est.³

Accordingly, one hundred and fifty years after Catullus the hendecasyllable was still under suspicion, and Catullus's example did not protect his successors from severe criticism. Lafaye repeats that the law of the genre required the poet to trample under foot all modesty, and quotes the passage from Martial to which I referred at the beginning of this paper, "lex haec, etc.," and also Pliny (4, 14): — Scimus alioqui huius opusculi illam esse verissimam legem, quam Catullus expressit:

Nam castum esse decet, etc.

"It is no use," says Lafaye, "to cite Boileau's line 'le latin dans les mots brève l'honnêteté;' early Romans had the same ideas of propriety as we." If it happens that we often say in Latin what we should not dare to say in French (I am quoting M. Lafaye's rather naïve remark), it is because Latin is a dead language, which runs no risk of being understood by those before whom we desire to preserve our dignity. A *père de famille*, in Catullus's time, would not have accepted the aphorism of Boileau. If an important part of Latin literature seems to give the lie to this opinion it is because (1) in every country, one often reads and writes things that one would not say aloud (which seems to be Lafaye's prose version of Herrick's lines: —⁴

When words we want, Love teacheth to endite;
And what we blush to speake, she bids us write.

(2) Because the Romans tolerated in certain genres, by a special convention, audacities that they reproved in others. All which had its

¹ Plin. *Ep.* 5, 3.

² *Ibid.* 7, 4.

³ Cat. 16, 5.

⁴ Herrick, no. 847.

origin in the people or was addressed to them enjoyed complete immunity: Versus Fescennini, the comedy of Plautus, Caecilius, Turpilius, and the Atellana. But was this new kind of poetry compatible with polite manners? The Greeks had never doubted it; the Romans still persisted in denying it. Three accusations were made:—

1. If poetry itself was frivolous, what could they think of a man who gave his time to the most frivolous kind of poetry?
2. The hendecasyllable gave too much attention to love affairs, which are dangerously enervating to men; such verses are *teneri*.
3. They were indignant at their obscenity, calling them *molles* and *parum pudici*.

Here Lafaye gives a curious interpretation of Catullus 5, 2, 3.

Rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis.

He asserts that Catullus foresaw that the *senes* of Rome would bitterly criticize the ensuing verses, with their *da mi basia mille*. It seems to me much more natural to take *rumores* as referring to the gossip produced by their *liaison* itself, rather than to the poems which Catullus might write under Lesbia's inspiration.

At any rate, Lafaye accepts Catullus's apology and proceeds to justify it by some curious statements about dual personality and the Roman definition of chastity. Catullus, according to this view, is not insincere in detaching himself from his work, and is quite within his rights in claiming the honorable title of *pius poeta*. Lafaye insists that the Romans did not mean by *castitas* what we mean by chastity. A woman, married or not, could pass for chaste if she remained faithful to the man to whom she had given herself, if she led a peaceful, retired life; in this sense Tibullus uses the word of Delia and Neaera.¹ They are under the protection of the goddess called by Martial (2, 34) *casta Venus*. So Catullus, *amant* of Lesbia, might claim this epithet, if he respects their oaths, if he causes no public scandal, if he does not get himself or her talked about. But in this case, how could he write hundreds of lines that all the town might read? The answer to this, says Lafaye, is that Catullus deliberately broke with the Roman tradition of reticence, and laid siege to the fortress of *gravitas Romana*.

¹ Tib. 1, 3, 83; 3, 1, 23; Ovid, *Metam.* 2, 5, 44.

Hence his exaggerated violence, and his passion for shocking the *bourgeoisie*, "quibus est equus et pater et res."¹

Lafaye hactenus. In the first place, it seems worth while to ascertain whether the hendecasyllable was or was not the exclusive metre of occasional verse, *poésie légère*. It is more or less the fashion, particularly with certain German critics, to talk as if each *ἔδος* or *genre* were the inalienable possession of a certain metrical form, and conversely as though each metre cried aloud for its traditional content, and were never disappointed. A famous passage in the *Ars Poetica*, 73-92, supports this view: "The changing parts and tone of each kind of poetry have had their limits set. If from inability or ignorance I cannot keep to them, why am I hailed a poet? . . . A theme that belongs to Comedy will not be set forth in the verses of Tragedy. So too the supper of Thyestes disdains to be told in strains of common life which suit well enough the comic sock. Each has had its becoming place allotted: let them keep to it."

True as this may be of epic, it is not true of lyric poetry, which was written in Rome under special conditions. It is far from being true even of Horace's own procedure.² By the first century B. C., the epigram had gone through a long acclimatization and was thoroughly settled on Roman soil; but lyric, by far the most difficult kind of poetry for the Roman genius to assimilate, was so far as we know very little practised before Catullus. All we have is a stray remark of Porphyrio on Horace, *Carm.* 3, 1, 2; "carmina non prius audita." Porphyrio says "quamvis Laevius lyrica ante Horatium scripserit." The shadowy figure of Laevius however cannot detain us; what is certain is that the lyric of personal emotion reached its highest point at Rome in the work of Catullus; and a great proof of his genius is his ability to turn forms like the limping, inelegant scazon, the rapid hendecasyllable and the elegiac distich into vehicles which I cannot help believing he chose almost indifferently. It is impossible to say from

¹ Horace, *A. P.* 248.

² See the very interesting passage in *Ep.* 1, 19, 21-25.

Libera per vacuum posui vestigia princeps,
non aliena meo pressi pede. qui sibi fidet
dux reget examen. Parios ego primus iambos
ostendi Latio, numeros animosque secutus
Archilochi, non res et agentia verba Lycamben.

the content why such poems as *Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire*, as *Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque* or *Iucundum, mea vita, mihi proponis amorem* should not have been written in either of the other two metres; and I am forced to conclude that Catullus was an innovator, that he abandoned the path of Greek tradition and greatly altered the content of his favorite forms. There are many echoes of his Greek predecessors, some of which we can recognize; but Catullus was the fit poet of an intensely individualistic age; he was master of his metres if not of his moods, and he wrote what he pleased in them. Certainly he did not regard the hendecasyllable as the only possible form for occasional verse.

In the second place, granting that the material of *poésie légère* could find expression in other forms, what specific information have we concerning the actual content of Catullus's hendecasyllables? M. Lafaye says they must be indecent, indecent by law and not by choice or by chance. I confess that on first reading his chapter he seemed to be that rare critic who strikes oil instead of merely boring, but sober consideration leads me to doubt the validity of this law of indecency. There are in Catullus forty-two poems in hendecasyllables; yet after reading and re-reading them there are only sixteen to which by exercising the utmost fastidiousness I can award the stigma of indecency. This seems hardly sufficient to establish a law; and I am sure that M. Lafaye would have arrived at approximately the same conclusion if he had not been reading under the influence of a strong preconceived idea. Among the twenty-six thoroughly decent poems occur such gems as the *Passer deliciae meae puellae*, the *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus*, the *Acmen Septimius suos amores*, the *Iam ver egelidos refert tepores*, verses of which it is necessary to quote only the first words in order that we should recollect their lyric beauty.

The solution of the puzzle lies, I think, in the right interpretation of the very lines cited as proof of the law:¹ Catullus addresses a vehement rebuke to Aurelius and Furius "who have supposed me to be immodest, on account of my verses, because these are rather voluptuous (*molliculi*). For the sacred poet ought to be chaste himself, his verses need not be so; for they have no wit and charm unless they are voluptuous and immodest and lascivious."

¹ Cf. 16, 3.

M. Lafaye takes these lines as the solemn statement of a poet who aspires to be dignified in the more personal part of his dual personality; I regard them as the half-joking apologia of Catullus in reply to an accusation, which (as Robinson Ellis suggests) was not made very seriously. The profound error lies in confusing two quite different kinds of indecency; Rome did indeed dislike the one, but accepted the other, and what is more cultivated it assiduously. In the opinion of a Roman, lyric love *was* indecent; at least it was *tener* and *mollis*, opposed to the severe national ideal of *gravitas*; and in so far Catullus, who wrote *Da mi basia mille*, was open to this charge. That he was aware of the exact bearing of the accusation is made plain by lines 12 and 13:—

Vos, quod millia multa basiorum
legistis, male me marem putatis.

“You have read what I wrote about thousands of kisses, and so you think me effeminate.” He distinctly does not say, “You have read my poem

O fur optime balneariorum, etc.¹

and so you think that I use indecent language and that I ought to be excluded from society.”

This interpretation is confirmed by everything that I have been able to find in Ovid, Pliny, and Martial, who have all adapted the lines of Catullus to suit their several and very different cases.

Ovid says:—

Crede mihi, mores distant a carmine nostro.
Vita verecunda est, Musa iocosa mihi.²

Do but believe, my life is different from my lay;
My life is sober, but my Muse is gay.

Pliny's excuses are more amusing. He had published a volume of poems, apparently short and composed in hendecasyllabics; he sent a copy to Paternus with the following statement: “In them you will find my witticisms, my gaiety, my loves, my sorrows, my complaints, my quarrels; some descriptions done in the plain style, others in a

¹ Cat. 33.

² *Trist.* 2, 353.

loftier manner; by this variety I hope that every one will discover something to his taste, and that certain poems will be liked by all. If however a few among them seem to you a trifle too impudent (*petulantiora*), I shall expect a man of your deep learning to recollect that those very eminent and serious men who have written such verse have not only dealt with scabrous subjects, but have handled them without gloves: this I have shrunk from doing, not because I am more prudish (why in the world should I be ?) but because I am rather a coward."¹ And then to bolster up his very feeble case, he desperately quotes the 'law,'

Nam castum esse decet pium poetam !

Later, writing to Pontius (7, 4), he boasts of the success his volume has had. The salient fact about Pliny's handling of the metre is not that some of his hendecasyllables were indecent, but that by his own account a great many of them were not; that they dealt in fact with ordinary lyrical and epigrammatical subjects.

Passing on to Martial, we find ourselves in a different literary world. Here is a man, with a vein of true poetry about him, who wrote not as Catullus did because he could not help writing, but as a Grub Street hack, because his writing helped him. He earned his living by the patronage it won him, and one of the few thoroughly decent qualities of Martial is his frank recognition of his own limitations and equally frank acknowledgment of his purpose. He wrote quantities of hendecasyllables, most of them indistinguishable in their clever nastiness from his epigrams in the elegiac distich. But their content, as that of all his verse, was uniformly controlled by his necessity of being read; as he says for example in 4, 49, 9, 10:—

Illa tamen laudant omnes, mirantur, adorant.
Confiteor: laudant illa, sed ista legunt.

And in 5, 16:—

Seria cum possim, quod delectantia malim
Scribere, tu causa es, lector amice, mihi.
Qui legis, et tota cantas mea carmina Roma.

¹ Plin. *Ep.* 4, 14.

In 7, 25 he informs a *malus poeta* that *dulcia epigrammata* are simply not read:—

O demens, vis tamen illa legi!

And we know his famous line 8, 56:—

Sint Maecenates, non deerunt, Flacce, Marones.

We can therefore easily understand how he came to write indecency into most of his work, not merely or specially into his hendecasyllables; and with his methods in mind, I cannot help denouncing those lines of his with which I began this paper as merely another bit of special pleading, which puts the stigma of indecency, not on the innocent *genre* he employed, but on the poet's own purpose. It was in pursuit of patronage that he deformed the hendecasyllable to his ends.

I cannot trace the varied career of the metre in full; it had at any rate two glorious periods; the first when Sappho wrote a large part of her fifth book in it, as we learn from Caesius Bassus;¹ and the second when Catullus wrote in it those lines which may have caused some of his acquaintances to deride him, but which we count among our chief treasures.

I conclude then that the so-called law of the hendecasyllable is null and void; and the positive conclusion I wish to set in its place is this: that Roman poets of the earlier period were extremely free in their treatment of the metrical *εἶδη* or *genres* which they adapted from the Greek, and that it is unsafe to argue backward from the restrictions, internal and external, which surrounded a poet of the Silver Age, to the free individualism and plasticity of the last century of the Republic.

¹ Keil, vol. 6, p. 2674 P. "Venio nunc ad hendecasyllabum phalaecium, qui ex simili causa, ut plerique, a cultore suo, non inventore, nomen accepit. nam hic versus apud Sappho frequens est, cuius in quinto libro complures huius generis et continuati et dispersi leguntur."